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ART REVIEW: "State of the City: In the Loop"

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on August 24, 2011

Rochester Contemporary's annual "State of the City" exhibit brings together artists from different backgrounds to consider upstate cities with regards to their histories, shifts, and futures. This year's edition spotlights Rochester's Inner Loop, the nearly 50-year-old controversial roadway that has provided a high-speed commute, but truncated many city streets, isolated many neighborhoods, and contributed to a decline in Rochester's population. In a looping news spot from WROC entitled "Living with the Loop," people on the street and politicians alike discuss the "moat" of a roadway, and some advocate filling in less-traveled parts of it.

In this exhibition, artists and institutions from different backgrounds respond to and explore ways of experiencing the ring highway by employing landscape paintings, photo essays, interactive videos, psychogeographic projects, and mixed-media sculpture to consider and discuss Downtown Rochester's urban highways. Although this exhibit covers many interesting aspects of the topic, some viewers were surprised to find limited discussion regarding the Loop's direct impact on the people of the city.

Local painter Jim Mott is known for his national Itinerant Artist Project, in which he exchanges the hospitality of strangers for paintings made during his visit, and contributed dozens of moody and nuanced paintings to this exhibit. Mott's images are semi-impressionistic, some in particular are expertly vague, building familiar shapes into scenes of quiet beauty or into epic vistas, such as the view of downtown from the Ford Street Bridge.

According to Mott's statement, this show includes a few dozen small-panel paintings from his 2010-2011 ROC-ART project, "a local version of the IAP that has involved my living and working in other people's homes in and around Rochester - a sort of personal 'Inner Loop' of my own. Those painting 'stops' that happened to be within a few blocks of the Inner Loop were included. The ROC-ART work and the new series have informed each other at many points, and I see them as intersecting strands of a greater, ongoing creative conversation with my home town."

Some of Mott's works convey a street or lawn under cover of darkness. "Although only a few night scenes or small details made it into the show," says Mott in his artist statement, "night is where my relationship with the Inner Loop started and maybe finishes." The artist traversed the Loop on many research night-drives with his

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"Curve," by local artist Jim Mott, is part of the "In the Loop" exhibition at Rochester Contemporary. PHOTO PROVIDED

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wife. "We made several circuits, stopping here and there to sketch, take reference photos, and look around. We were both moved by little things, such as a solitary lost flip-flop, a discarded whiskey bottle, dandelions gone delicately to seed along a grassy border, the way the lights blinking on construction zone barriers mimicked the flash of fireflies."

The same level of nuance was on the minds of local experimental artists Paul Bartow and Richard Metzgar, who collaborated with artist and filmmaker Jim Downer and artist Greg Stewart to create an installation study of the Loop. During the journey to chosen collection sites along the Loop, cameras rolled to record the scenes, a drawing mechanism on wheels shifted with the motion of the automobile and made marks on a paper, and specimens from each site were gathered. The installation consists of these videos, recorded road noise and wind, the drawing mechanism and resultant drawing, and clinically displayed images of collected plants and detritus in groups that correlate to different collection sites. Yet the artists offer no conclusions regarding their cache.

The team's statement explains that the installation consisting of "environmental sampling in the form of video, specimen photographs, and non-human drawing is a glimpse into the space of the Inner Loop from the perspective of the human and non-human." But can human-created tools - in this case the video recorder and drawing mechanism - and collected items presented in a clinical way, all in efforts to examine a roadway that is a manifestation of the human intellect truly present information from a "nonhuman" perspective?

The perspective on the Loop offered by The Landmark Society of Western New York is one of contextualizing the roadway with regards to history and social implications, including the impact on the city layout and therefore the communities of Rochester. The information is presented as layered graphics, maps, and informational text put together by artists and designers Eric Bridle, Lisa Feinstein, and Matt . The visual context for the construction of the Inner Loop and the effect it had on surrounding neighborhoods is presented in many layers of archival images, newspaper stories, plat maps, and relevant documents, the complexity reflecting the nature of this topic. Each of the four pieces in the Landmark Society's installation, 'Looking into the Loop,' is framed by a reclaimed window from a home near the Loop.

Ithaca artist Mark Edward Grimm provides a semi-surreal, live perspective of Rochester police working in and around the Inner Loop. In viewing "Police Code," visitors are invited to mount a platform that places you amid speakers and screens that broadcast live feeds from police radio-scanners, generate programmed imagery and sounds triggered by the officers' words caught by voice-recognition technology, and the grainy video from a surveillance camera pointed at you.

Activity was low each time I visited the exhibit, but listening to the flat-toned voices of the unwitting Rochester police was dramatized by intermittently sounding chimes and alarms for the words "suspicious," "white," "officer," "female," and "injury." The words themselves circle one another and link on a screen, and the installation is meant to provide a cacophonous crescendo when the CPU of the computer hits 95 percent of its processing power, and resets the code to start a new "performance."

There are many ways to think about this work; we might consider the hidden layer of existence of law-enforcement officers, or the divide between the watchers and those being watched, searched for, and spoken about.

Dutch artist Cary Markerink visualizes the absence of the Loop in his photographs by literally cutting it out of each of nine scenes. A huge section of each rectangle has been removed, underscoring what a presence the roadway has. "The Inner Loop as a physical and mental boundary is the starting point of my project," says Markerink in his artist statement. "The landscapes photographed show the road as a boundary or division between the buildings on both sides, while the street images show the demography of the users," he says. The work is meant to reveal the separation caused by the Loop between the different areas, and give a visual basis for discussions about reuse.

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on July 13th, 2011

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Markerink also created an interactive element by offering postcard-sized reproductions of these images and asking viewers to replace the missing Loop with hopes, dreams, and plans for better developing the space. The adjacent wall bears postcard-sized image of the works; the prevalence of self-conscious, joking responses to the call is telling of our lack of vision for, or faith in, this place.

"In the Loop" is part of the "Transitions-Rochester" collaborative project between Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester Contemporary, and George Eastman House (transitionsrochester.wordpress.com), which continues through November 13 with exhibitions, artist talks, informal panels, open houses, and opportunities for the Rochester community to share their visions of what this city could be. The final bicycle tour for this exhibit, which includes different sites affected by the presence of the Loop, takes place September 11 at 1 p.m.

"State of the City: In the Loop"

Through September 25

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave.

461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

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